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ABSTRACT

In rural Minnesota many school districts are limited in their efforts to restructure by low enrollment, rural geographic location, meager tax base, narrow staff experience, extensive job responsibilities for staff, restricted staff development opportunities, and lack of direction in curriculum coordination. Because of actual or perceived limitations, learning opportunities are restricted and may not prepare students for what they will need to do after they graduate. This preliminary report discusses education districts, a relatively new organizational concept. The 1987 legislation that enabled their formation requires an education district to have one of the following: at least five districts, or four districts with a total of at least 5,000 students, or four districts with a total of at least 2,000 square miles. As of November, 1989, 33 education districts had been formed in Minnesota. Education districts are to: (1) provide leadership in coordinating programs for handicapped, secondary vocational education, gifted and talented pupils, improved learning, community education, early childhood and family education, career education, and low incidence academic programs; (2) provide and coordinate research and planning functions; and (3) coordinate and provide methods to meet pupils needs for health, library, and counseling services. Educators must work toward merging services into a collaborative network to provide access for all residents to meet basic human needs. (DHP)

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EDUCATION DISTRICTS: A CONCEPT FOR RESTRUCTURING EDUCATION

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In rural Minnesota many districts have limitations due to enrollment, geographic location, tax base, staff experience, extensive job responsibilities for staff, limited staff development opportunities, and lack of direction in curriculum coordination. Because of actual or perceived limitations, learning opportunities are restricted and may not prepare students for their post graduation needs.

Education districts, a relatively new organizational concept for Minnesota, are emerging in response to these actual and/or perceived limitations. Many educators, legislators, and community members in general view education districts as lifelines for small, rural schools that are faced with increasing state and federal regulations regarding programs and accountability, but which must also cope with shrinking dollars to meet these programs.

In Minnesota the climate exists for major change and restructuring of delivery systems. Education districts are taking advantage of this climate by providing the leadership that is enabling educators to step out of the operational paradigms that have previously governed how they view delivery systems. Rural educators, in particular, must view delivery of services based upon a renewed focus on the learner and the individual. For rural learners, the element that most critically affects their

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In 1987 legislation was passed which enabled the formation of education districts and set the guidelines for this new organizational structure for Minnesota education. Among the requirements for formation, an education district must have one of the following: (1) at least five districts, (2) at least four districts with a total of at least 5,000 pupils in average daily membership, or (3) at least four districts with a total of at least 2,000 square miles. These requirements encourage rural school districts to participate in the formation of an education district.

As of November, 1989, thirty-three education districts have been formed in Minnesota; these thirty-three education districts involve 244 local districts. The South Central Education District (S.C.E.D) was one of the first three education districts to become operational in Minnesota. It is a cooperative education district formed by an agreement among thirteen local school districts. The funding for the 1988-89 school year came from a $225,000 Program Improvement Grant from the Minnesota Department of Education to establish an education district model. Funding for the 1989-90 school year comes from a formula for state aid and local levy that provides for $60.00 per weighted pupil unit for all of the students in the education district.

The purpose of education districts is to increase options for learning and to provide for improved access to educational programs for all residents within the education district.

Expanded legislation from the 1989 legislative session identified twelve mandated programs for which education districts must provide leadership. These twelve mandated areas include:

1) provide for coordination of programs for: handicapped pupils, secondary vocational education, gifted and talented pupils, improved learning, community education, early childhood/family education, career education, and low incidence academic programs,

2) provide and coordinate research, planning and development functions,

3) coordinate and provide for methods to meet pupil needs for health, library, and counseling services.

A 1989 task force on Education Organization, commissioned by the Minnesota Legislature, identified seven statements of direction for education. Among the seven statements, three offer further direction for education districts: 1)Change in structure of education must occur; 2)Equal access to learning experiences must be provided to all learners; 3)Staff development must be provided to accommodate changes in the system.

Increased access to and utilization of technology and linkages with post-secondary institutions within the South Central Education District are two of ways in which this education district is increasing learner options. Providing a coordinated process for improving curriculum based upon learner outcomes and developing and implementing a process for

coordinated professional development are two other areas of focus for the SCED.

The objectives of an education district specifically address those actual and perceived limitations which are often linked to rural education. Through the coordination of resources which an education district provides, educational programs in rural schools can become more equitable with urban schools.

Restructuring must be committed to the growing belief that every rural and urban community requires the presence of a community learning and development center where, thanks to the presence of technology applications and connections, access to services can exist regardless of the geography and economics of the region or locale. Educators must work toward merging all services into a collaborative network to provide access for all residents, whether for learning opportunities or for accessing those services in order to meet basic human needs. The new paradigm requires a new set of rules and regulations setting the boundaries of how we view educational delivery systems. Sharing resources, eliminating turf between and among governmental agencies, and applying technology to allow systems to share resources and provide access to all residents must be the new educational focus. Education districts can provide the structure and organization that achieves this new focus.